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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001558

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: KING OPENS PARLIAMENT WITH SHOW OF UNITY

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) King Hamad October 9 opened Parliament's third session since the adoption of the National Charter with a speech focusing on the need for unity, dialogue, and tolerance in the Kingdom. The King warned that in-fighting puts prosperity at risk and people must find a way to express differences of opinion with serenity and courtesy. The message resonates on many levels - within the Arab world, Bahraini society, and the Al Khalifa family. While complimenting the Prime Minister for his many accomplishments, the King thrust his son Crown Prince Salman firmly into the limelight by entrusting him with the Kingdom's most sensitive political issue, the process of discussing amendments to the constitution. He praised the CP's work on labor reform, the topic that led to tensions between the CP and the Prime Minister last month. The King proposed development of a personal status law based on religious values that is well-balanced and moderate. Regarding foreign affairs, the King discussed Iraq and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. End Summary.

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Echoes of Lincoln: A House Divided Cannot Thrive  
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2. (C) King Hamad October 9 opened the third parliamentary session since the 2002 adoption of the National Charter with an address to a joint session of the Council of Representatives and the Shura (Consultative) Council. With his uncle Prime Minister Khalifa and son Crown Prince Salman flanking him on the dais, the King stated that "divided houses do not make thriving nations" in the context of inter-Arab in-fighting. However, Bahrainis understood the message to be that, in the aftermath of tensions brought on by the CP's labor reform conference in September and his implicit criticism of the PM's stewardship of the economy over the past 30-plus years, the Al Khalifa family must close ranks and avoid conflict.

3. (C) The point also resonated more broadly within Bahraini society, which is marked by a Shia-Sunni demographic divide and lately has been dealing with the specter of sectarian friction following the late September arrest of civil society activist Abdel Hadi Al Khawaja, a critic of the government and an advocate for Shia empowerment. The King continued that "we stress commitment to serenity in dialogues and courtesy in divergences of opinions... and consider such attributes the core of Bahraini values." This view echoes statements made by other leaders, including Shia spiritual leader Shaikh Issa Qassem and opposition society Al Wifaq President Ali Salman, who called for calming down the situation and solidarity within Bahraini society.

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CP To Lead National Dialogue  
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4. (C) About one-third of the way into his speech, the King spoke of the "wise government led by our dear uncle" the PM and his great success and achievements. Moments later the King talked about the political and economic reform process he has implemented and entrusted the Crown Prince with following up on these issues. Most importantly, he will lead the national dialogue, the process of talks between the GOB and four opposition political societies on possible amendments to the constitution to rationalize and improve the efficiency of the legislative process. (Note: We understand that for now, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Majid Al Alawi will continue to head the government team interacting directly with the opposition parties, but he will report to the CP on the status of the dialogue rather than to the King. End Note.)

5. (C) The King highlighted the honor of serving in the parliament and said, "there is no substitute or source for the development of democracy other than you, the sons and representatives of this nation." One contact understood this to be a subtle message that changes to the constitution would come only through legislative channels, and not by

oppositionists negotiating directly with the government.

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First Step Is Acknowledging A Problem  
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16. (C) The King commended the Crown Prince for his chairmanship of the Economic Development Board, citing his "well-studied initiative" on labor market reform. The King continued that, "We believe that it takes courage when a state informs its people about the problems because that move represents the first step towards a solution. We fully support this move, and we stress to the Crown Prince the importance of immediate action to prepare, as part of his mission, the second line of young leaders who will assume the responsibility and carry on the reforms."

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Personal Status Initiative  
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17. (C) The King's major new policy initiative was his desire for a personal status law. He stated that it must be a flexible law that takes into account religious values, protects the rights of women and children, and guides legal relations between husband and wife. He cautioned that the law must be drawn from "our tolerant Islamic values" and be well-balanced and moderate and allow for "ijtihad," the interpretation of Islamic principles.

18. (C) During his October 9 meeting with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, hours after the speech to parliament, the King said that he had raised a "revolutionary idea," that women and children should rely upon the law for their rights and the husband/father was not the absolute authority in their lives. He noted that Bahraini women are prominent in education, medicine, and law, and that 56 percent of registered voters in the Kingdom are women.

19. (C) MP Salah Ali, president of the Al Minbar political society, a relatively moderate Sunni organization, told PolFSN that his parliamentary bloc strongly supports development of a personal status law. Al Minbar had proposed a law some two years ago that was harshly criticized by leaders in the Shia community, who feared that the law would impose Sunni interpretations of Sharia tenets on all citizens. Ali hoped that by stressing flexibility and "ijtihad," the King had paved the way for development of a law that would be acceptable to all.

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Foreign Affairs  
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10. (C) The King proudly cited his participation in the G8 Sea Island Summit last July, saying it was recognition of the model that Bahrain represents in the Gulf region. In a possible reference to the Greater Middle East and North Africa initiative, the King stated, "we do not import democracy." He stressed that the democratic reform process is deeply rooted in the heritage of Bahrain's citizens.

11. (C) The King said that the solution to Iraq's problems must come from within. Iraq's unity can be maintained through democracy, constructive cooperation with its neighbors, and openness towards the international community. He also raised achieving a comprehensive and just peace in the Middle East based on secure borders for all states, including an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

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Comment  
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12. (C) The King used his address to parliament as a vehicle to appeal for unity and calm and to emphasize the need for dialogue to resolve differences. His advice works on many levels, from inside his immediate family to the international scene. He also took steps to ensure that his son, the Crown Prince, becomes more directly involved in the central political issue facing the Kingdom, the national dialogue on amending the constitution. While the King was careful to praise the Prime Minister and his accomplishments, the net effect of the speech was to push the Crown Prince more firmly into the middle of Bahrain's political life as a way for him to establish his credibility and to prepare for his future job.

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